Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

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OF SOMASCO

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The First Encounter

It was snowing slowly and persistently, as it had done all day, when Henry Alton of Somasco ranch stood struggling with a half-tamed Cayuse pony in a British Columbian settlement. The Cayuse had laid its ears back, and was describing a circle round him, scattering mud and snow, while the man who gripped the bridle in a lean, brown hand watched it without impatience, admiringly.

"Game!" he said. "I like them that way. Still, it isn't every man could seize a pack on him, and you'll have to let up three dollars on the price you asked me."

Now three dollars is a considerable proportion of the value of an Indian pony fresh from the northern grass lands, with the devil that lurks in most of his race still unsubdued within him, but the rancher who owned him did not immediately reject the offer. Possibly he was not especially anxious to keep the beast.

"Oh, yes," said a bystander. "He's game enough, and I'd ask the boys to my funeral if I meant to drive him at night over the lake trail. After being most kicked into wood-pulp Carter hasn't any more use for him, and I'll lay you a dollar, Alton, you and your partner can't put the pack on him."

Perhaps the Cayuse was tired, or desirous of watching for an opportunity, for it came to a standstill, snorting, with its wicked eyes upon the man, who laughed a little and shoved back the broad hat from his forehead as he straightened himself. The laugh rang pleasantly, and the faint twinkle in Alton's eyes was in keeping with it. They were grey, and steady when the light sank out of them, and the rest of the bronzed face was shrewd and quietly masterful. He wore a deerskin jacket fancifully embroidered, blue canvas overalls, and gum boots to the knee, while, though all of them needed repair, the attire was picturesque, and showed its wearer's lean symmetry. The man's age was apparently twenty-five, and eight years' use of the axe had set a stamp of springy suppleness upon him. He had also wrested rather more than a livelihood from the Canadian forest during them.

All round him the loghouses rose in all their unadorned dinginess beneath the sombre pines, and the largest of them bore a straggling legend announcing that it was Horton's store and hotel. A mixed company of bush ranchers, free prospectors, axemen, and miners lounged outside it in picturesque disarray, and high above rose a dim white line of never-melting snow.

"Well," said Alton, "it's time this circus was over, anyway, and if Carter will take my bid I'll clinch that deal with you. Have the pack and seizings handy, Charley."

The rancher nodded, and Alton got a tighter grip on the bridle. Then the Cayuse rose upright with fore-hoofs lifted, and the man's arm was drawn back to strike. The hoofs came down harmlessly, but the fist got home, and for a moment or two there was a swaying and plunging of man and beast amidst the hurled-up snow. Then the Cayuse was borne backwards until the vicinity of the hotel verandah left no room for kicking, and another man hastily flung a rope round the bundles he piled upon its back. He was also tolerably capable,

and in another minute the struggle was over. The Cayuse's attitude expressed indignant astonishment, while Alton stood up breathless, with his knuckles bleeding.

"I'll trouble you for that dollar, and I'll keep him now," he said. "Can you wait until I come down next week, Carter?"

"Oh, yes," said the rancher. "Your promise is good enough for a year or two."

The speaker was a sinewy bushman in curiously patched overalls with a bronzed and honest face, and he turned aside with a little gesture of dislike, when a man of a very different stamp pushed by him. The latter wore a black felt hat and a great fur-lined coat, while his face was pale and fleshy and his eyes were cunning. His appearance suggested prosperity and a life of indulgence in the cities, and when he stopped in front of Alton the latter would have lost little by any comparison between the pair. The pose of his sinewy figure and the clear brownness of his skin spoke of arduous labour, sound sleep, and the vigour that comes from a healthful occupation. The steady directness of his gaze and quiet immobility of his face also conveyed an indefinite suggestion of power and endurance, and there was a curious grace in his movements when he turned courteously towards the stranger.

"You soon fixed him, packer," said the city man.

Alton laughed. "The boys mostly call me rancher," said he. "Still, it don't count for much, and I do some packing occasionally."

"That's all right," said the stranger sharply, for there was something in Alton's answer which made him inclined to assert his dignity. "Everybody seems to be a rancher hereaway, and you mayn't be too proud to put through a job for me."

Alton nodded, and glanced at the speaker questioningly.

"No. If it would fit in," he said.

"I'm Hallam," said the other man. "Hallam and Vose, of the Tyee mineral claim. They've been fooling things up yonder, big pump's given out, and I've a few hundred pounds of engine fixings back at the railroad I want brought in by to-morrow."

Alton glanced at the pack-beasts waiting unloaded outside the store, and shook his head. "I'm sorry I can't trade with you," he said. "You see, I've promised another man to pack up some stores for him."

Hallam made a gesture of impatience. "Then you can let him wait," he said. "This deal will pay you better. You can put your own price on it."

Alton's eyelids came down a little, and the stranger seemed to find his glance disconcerting. "You don't seem to understand. I promised the other man to bring up his things," he said.

"Well," said Hallam, "come along into the shanty yonder, and have a drink with me. We may fix up some way of getting over the difficulty."

"Sorry!" said Alton with a suspicious quietness. "I don't drink much, anyway, and then only with the boys who know me."

"Hey!" said Hallam. "You are talking like a condemned Englishman."

"I can't help that," said Alton. "I am a Canadian, but if you want another reason, it wouldn't suit me to drink with you, anyway. You see, you didn't do the square thing with one or two friends of mine who worked on the Tyee."

He turned on his heel, and Hallam, who was a man of some importance in the cities, gasped with astonishment and indignation.

"What is that fellow?" he said.

The man laughed, and answered him in the bushman's slowest drawl. "You don't know much, or you wouldn't ask," said he. "He's Alton of Somasco, but if he lives long enough he will be one of the biggest men in this country."

Hallam said nothing, but there was a curious look in his face which puzzled the rancher. It suggested that he had heard of Alton, and something more.

Meanwhile Alton entered the store, where the man who kept it pointed to a litter of packages strewn about the floor and sundry bags upon the counter.

"That's Townshead's lot, and those are Thomson's things," he said, and turned aside to listen to a rancher who came in smiling.

Alton took up a big cotton bag marked Townshead, tossed it aloft and caught it, and then shook his head dubiously. "That's rather too light for ten pounds. You want to try her on the scales again," he said.

The storekeeper, who was also a magistrate, grinned good-humouredly. "It's good enough for the money, anyway," said he. "But what's the matter with the Tyee dollars, Harry, that you wouldn't do Hallam's packing?"

Alton glanced at him gravely. "I think not," said he. "Put another pound or two into her, and I'll pay you on your invoice for the last lot you sent me. Otherwise I'm going to whittle down that bill considerably. You see Townshead is too shaky to come down, and he can't live on nothing."

"And the Lord knows when he'll pay you," said the storekeeper. "It's a good twelve months since he sent a dollar to me."

Alton laughed a little. "I can wait," he said. "Fill that bag up again. Get hold of the truck, Charley."

Charles Seaforth, who was apparently younger, and certainly a trifle more fastidious about his attire than his comrade, shouldered a flour bag, and twenty minutes later he and Alton tramped out of the settlement with three loaded beasts splashing and floundering in front of them. It was almost dark now, though a line of snow still glimmered white and cold high up beyond the trees until the trail plunged into the blackness of the forest. Then the lights of

the settlement were blotted out behind them, the hum of voices ceased, and they were alone in the primeval silence of the bush. The thud and splash of tired hoofs only served to emphasize it, the thin jingle of steel or creak of pack-rope was swallowed up and lost, for the great dim forest seemed to mock at anything man could do to disturb its pristine serenity. It had shrouded all that valley, where no biting gale ever blew, from the beginning, majestic in its solitary grandeur and eternally green. Pine and hemlock, balsam and cedar, had followed in due succession others that had grown to the fulness of their stature only in centuries, and their healing essence, which brings sound sleep to man's jaded body and tranquillity to his mind, had doubtless risen like incense when all was made very good.

Now Alton loved the wilderness, partly because he had been born in it, and because he had a large share of the spirit of his race. He had also seen the cities, and they did not greatly please him, though he had watched their inhabitants curiously and been taught a good deal about them by what he read in books, which to the wonder of his associates he would spend hardly-earned dollars upon. It was more curious that he understood all he read, and sometimes more than the writer apparently did, for Alton was not only the son of a clever man, but had seen Nature in her primitive nakedness and the human passions that usually lie beneath the surface, for man reverts a little and the veneer of his civilization wears through in the silent bush.

Thus he plodded on contentedly on his twelve-mile march, with the snow and the mire beneath it reaching now and then to his knee, until his companion stopped beside a little bark shanty and lighted a lantern.

"Thomson's dumping-place already," he said, pulling a burst cotton bag out of the sack of sundries upon the Cayuse pony's back. "Some of it has got out, and Jimmy was always particular about the weight of his sugar. Well, the rest

of it must be in the bottom somewhere, and if you'll hold the sack up I'll shake it into my hat."

Alton's hat was capacious, and he had worn it during the two years which had elapsed since his last visit to Vancouver, but it did not seem to occur to him that it was in any way an unusual receptacle for sugar. His companion, however, laughed a little as he stirred the sticky mass round with his wet fingers.

"There is no use giving him our tobacco and matches in," said he. "Here are the letters Mrs. Neilson gave me at the post-office, too."

Alton took the letters, and his face grew a trifle grim under the flickering light of the lantern as he thrust them crumpled into his pocket. "From England, and they will keep," he said. "There's nobody I'm anxious to hear from in that country. Now we'll go on again, Charley."

The Cayuse, however, objected, and there was a struggle before Alton convinced it that resistance would be useless, while presently the trail grew steeper and the roar of water came out of the darkness before them.

"This," said Alton gravely, "is a great country, but it's mighty unfinished yet, and it kind of hurts me to see all that power wasted."

"Wasted?" said Seaforth, smiling. "Don't the salmon swim in it, and the bear and deer come down to drink?"

"Oh, yes," said Alton. "And sometimes the Siwash wash themselves in it too, but that's not the question. This earth wasn't made for the bear and deer, and they've thousands of poor folks they can't find a use for back there in the old country. Isn't that so, Charley?"

Seaforth, who was a young Englishman of good upbringing, laughed. "I have no reason for doubting it," said he. "In any case, none of my worthy relations had any use for me. Still, I don't see the connection exactly."

"No?" said Alton. "Well, it's simple. We have the gold and silver, and the coal and iron, too, while it don't strike one that these forests were put here just to look pretty."

"The metals you allude to take some trouble in getting out," said Seaforth dryly.

Alton nodded. "Of course," he said. "That's what man got his brains for, and the one difference between a white man and a Siwash is that he's always striking for something better."

Seaforth laughed. "You are trying to get at something, as usual," said he.

"Yes," said Alton gravely. "I generally am. Well, I can see what we don't want of these forests sailing sawn up to China, and this river sprinkled with sawmills and wood-pulp factories. Then I can hear the big dynamoes humming, and the thump of the mine stamps run with the current the men who put them down will get for nothing. What we're wasting round Somasco is going to feed ten thousand people by and by."

"It's a big idea," said Seaforth reflectively. "Still, I don't know that if it were ever put through the place would look any prettier—and the question is, who's going to set the whole thing running?"

"God knows," said Alton gravely. "But somebody will, and if I live long enough I'll make a shot at it. Oh, yes, it's very pretty as it is, but the greatest thing in this world is man, and it was made as it is for him to master."

"You have curious notions for a Canadian bush rancher," said Seaforth. "You are, however, really an Englishman, aren't you?"

"No," said Alton grimly. "My father used to be, but he was too much of my way of thinking and they fired him out of the country. It's a thing I don't like to talk of, Charley, and just now I'm a low-down packer hauling in a pile of truck

I'll never get paid for. Steady, come up. There's nothing going to hurt you, Julius Caesar."

The snarling and spitting of a panther came out of the darkness, and it was only by main force Alton dragged the Cayuse past. Then he laughed a little. "It's a pity we didn't bring a rifle along," he said. "Panthers must have been made for something, or they wouldn't be here, but it's a beast a white man has no kind of use for."

It was an hour later, and snowing fast, when they climbed out of the valley and floundered over shale and slippery rock amidst scattered pines to the forking of the trail. One arm of it dipped again, and wound through a deep sheltered hollow to the Somasco ranch, the other ran straight along the hillside to Townshead's dwelling. The hillside was also steep, the beasts were tired, and the trail was very bad. Seaforth glanced at his comrade when they stopped a moment, and saw him dimly, tugging at the Cayuse's bridle, through the snow.

"It's a long way to Townshead's. Still, I think we can make it out," he said.

Alton laughed. "We have got to. There's not generally too much to eat at that house, and they'll want the things," he said.

There was another struggle with the Cayuse, which appeared reluctant to face a treacherous ascent whose slope was somewhat steeper than the pitch of an average roof, but once more Alton conquered, and they dragged the beasts up, and then floundered on doggedly beside them, seeing nothing but a dim pine or two through the snow. Now and then there was a rattle and a rush beneath them, followed by a faint splash, and Seaforth shivered a little, knowing that the shingle they dislodged had plunged into a lonely lake lying far below. Still Alton said nothing, but floundered on, apparently as cheerfully as though he would be well paid for the risk he ran, until he crawled down into

the sliding whiteness, when a hide strip burst and some of Townshead's packages were scattered about the face of a precipitous declivity.

Seaforth held his breath a moment as, gripping the bridle of a trembling beast, he watched him until the dim moving figure sank into the snow. He could hear the wash of the unfrozen lake, and knew there was no foothold on the slippery rock which sloped almost sheer to it through the darkness close beneath. Then a voice came up, "Wasn't there a dry goods package of some kind, Charley?"

"There was," shouted Seaforth. "But come up with what you've got, and leave it."

A faint laugh answered him, and through the moaning of the pines he caught the words, "If it's not over the edge here, I'm going to get the thing."

Seaforth said nothing further. He knew his comrade too well, and could picture him clinging by hand and heel as he crawled along the brink of the declivity with the lake below, and gasped from relief when once more a dim whitened object lurched up out of the snow.

"Got them all," said Alton cheerfully. "That last one was just on the edge, and it took some thinking before I could get at it. Still, I guessed it was some kind of dress stuff for the girl, and if we lost it it might be a long while before she got another."

They relashed the packages and went on again, floundering through steadily deepening snow, until once more the roar of water met them as they dipped into a hollow. It grew louder rapidly, and presently Alton pulled the Cayuse up on the brink of a river. It came down frothing out of a haze of sliding snow, tumbling with a hoarse growl about the great dim boulders, whirled and tossed in a white confusion down the wild race of a rapid, and was lost again. How far the other bank was there was nothing to show, for even the

scattered pines behind the men were hidden now, and Seaforth stared at the tumult of froth before him very dubiously.

"She's pretty full to-night," he said. "It has got to be attempted, but I'm not quite sure how we're going through."

Alton laughed a little, and brought his hand down on the Cayuse pony's flank. "Well, if you'll come along behind me you will see," said he.

Seaforth was waist-deep next minute, and the water was horribly cold. Then he was washed against a boulder, and fancied that one of the pack-beasts kicked him in its floundering. In any case one knee seemed to grow suddenly useless, but he was not very sure of anything just then, for a burst of spray filled his eyes, and the bottom appeared to slip from under him. He found foothold again in a moment or two, and dimly saw Alton's head and shoulders above the back of a plunging beast, while another was apparently swimming somewhere between them. Then the one Seaforth led stumbled, and they went away down stream together, clawing for a foothold with the shingle slipping under them, until there was a thud as they brought up against another boulder. As he was not sensible of any especially painful blow Seaforth decided that it was the pony which had struck the rock, and had just come to this decision when his feet were swept from under him, and, still clinging to the bridle, he was pressed against the stone while the river frothed and roared about him.

Once more he felt that it was horribly cold, and flung a wet arm about the rock, but the power seemed to go out of him, and he wondered vacantly whether the pony would be able to extricate itself and him. It floundered spasmodically for a while, and then lay still. How long this continued Seaforth did not know, but it was more than twelve hours since he had left Somasco, and he had plodded up and down steep hillsides, over rock and boulder, and

through deep mire and snow, most of the time, while there are limits to the domination the will of any man may exercise over his worn-out body.

Seaforth had commenced to realize, still with a curious absence of concern which was possibly the result of cold and fatigue, that as the pony could not help him it might be too late very soon unless he made a vigorous effort to help himself, when he heard a shout, and something came slowly through the sliding whiteness in his direction. Then there was another shout, and when somebody dragged the pony clear of the boulder he held on by the bridle and went floundering waist-deep up stream. The water, however, now sank rapidly, and soon he was clear of it to the knee. Then there was a clatter of hoofs on slippery rock, and he lurched dripping and gasping into the partial shelter of the pines. Somebody smote him on the shoulder, and he heard Alton's voice, "Get hold and hustle. We'll fetch Townshead's in an hour or so."

Two

At Townshead's Ranch

It was chilly and damp in the log-walled living-room of the Townshead homestead, which stood far up in a lonely valley amidst the scattered pines. The room was also bare and somewhat comfortless, for the land was too poor to furnish its possessor with more than necessities, and Townshead not the man to improve it much. He lay in an old leather chair beside the stove, a slender, grey-haired man with the worn look of one whose burden had been too heavy for him. His face was thin and somewhat haggard, his long, slender hand rather that of an artist than a bush rancher, and his threadbare attire was curiously neat. He wore among other somewhat unusual things an old red velvet jacket, and there was a little cup of black coffee and a single cigar of exceptional quality on the table beside him.

Townshead was, in fact, somewhat of an anachronism in a country whose inhabitants exhibit at least a trace of primitive and wholesome barbarity. One could have fancied him at home among men of leisure and cultivated tastes, but he seemed out of place in a log-built ranch in the snow-wrapped wilderness swept by the bitter wind. Perhaps he realized it, for his voice was

querulous as he said, "I wonder if you have forgotten, Nellie, that we were sitting warm and safe in England five years ago tonight."

Nellie Townshead looked up quickly over her sewing from the other side of the stove, and for a moment there was something akin to pain in her eyes. They were clear brown eyes, and it was characteristic that they almost immediately brightened into a smile, for while the girl's face resembled her father's in its refinement, there was courage in it in place of weariness.

"I am afraid I do, though I try not to, and am generally able," she said.

Townshead sighed. "The young are fortunate, for they can forget," he said. "Even that small compensation is, however, denied to me, while the man I called my friend is living in luxury on what was yours and mine. Had it been any one but Charters I might have borne it better, but it was the one man I had faith in who sent us out here to penury."

Townshead was wrong in one respect, for it was the weakness of an over-sensitive temperament which, while friends were ready to help him, had driven him to hide himself in Western Canada when, as the result of unwise speculations, financial disaster overtook him. His daughter, however, did not remind him of this, as some daughters would have done, though she understood it well enough, and a memory out of keeping with the patter of the snow and moaning of the wind rose up before her as she looked into the twinkling stove. She could recall that night five years ago very well, for she had spent most of it amidst lights and music, as fresh and bright herself as the flowers that nestled against her first ball dress. It was a night of triumph and revelation, in which she had first felt the full power of her beauty and her sex, and she had returned with the glamour of it all upon her to find her father sitting with his head in his hands at a table littered with business papers. His face had frightened her, and it had never wholly lost the look she saw upon it

then, for Townshead was lacking in fibre, and had found that a fondness for horses and some experience of amateur cattle-breeding on a small and expensive scale was a very poor preparation for the grim reality of ranching in Western Canada.

Presently his daughter brushed the memories from her, and stood, smiling at the man, straight and willowy in her faded cotton dress with a partly finished garment in her hands, which frost and sun had not wholly turned rough and red.

"Your coffee will be getting cold. Shall I put it on the stove?" she said.

Townshead made a little grimace. "One may as well describe things correctly, and that is chickory," he said. "Still, you may warm it if it pleases you, but I might point out that, indifferent as it is, preserved milk which has gone musty does not improve its flavour."

The girl laughed a little, though there was something more pathetic than heartsome in her merriment. "I am afraid we shall have none to-morrow unless Mr. Seaforth gets through," she said. "I suppose you have not a few dollars you could give me, father?"

"No," said Townshead, with somewhat unusual decisiveness; "I have not. You are always asking for dollars. What do you want them for?"

"Mr. Seaforth has packed our stores in for a long while, and we have paid him nothing," said the girl, while a little colour crept into her face.

Townshead made a gesture of weariness. "The young man seems willing to do it out of friendship for us, and I see no reason why we should not allow him, unless he presumes upon the trifling service," he said. "To do him justice, however, he and his comrade have always shown commendable taste."

The girl smiled a little, for considering their relative positions in a country where a man takes his station according to his usefulness the word "presume"

appeared incongruous. “Still, I should prefer not to be in their debt,” she said.

“Then we will free ourselves of the obligation with the next remittance Jack sends in,” said Townshead impatiently.

The girl’s face grew troubled. “I am afraid that will not be for some little time,” she said. “Poor Jack. You surely remember he is lying ill?”

“It is especially inconvenient just now,” said Townshead querulously. “It has also been a sore point with me that a son of mine should hire himself out as a labourer. I am sorry I let him go, the more so because the work upon the ranch is getting too much for me.”

Nellie Townshead said nothing, though she sighed as she pictured the young lad, who had been stricken by rheumatic fever as a result of toiling waist-deep in icy, water, lying uncared for in the mining camp amidst the snows of Caribou. She did not, however, remind her father that it was she who had in the meanwhile done most of the indispensable work upon the ranch, and Townshead would not in any case have believed her, for he had a fine capacity for deceiving himself.

In place of it she spread out some masculine garments about the stove and coloured a trifle when her father glanced at her inquiringly. “The creek must be running high and Mr. Alton and his partner will be very wet,” she said. “I am warming a few of Jack’s old things for them. They cannot go back to Somasco to-night, you know.”

“I confess that it did not occur to me,” said Townshead languidly. “No, I suppose one could scarcely expect them to, and we shall have to endure their company.”

A faint sparkle that had nothing to do with laughter crept into the girl’s eyes, for there were times when her father tried her patience. “I wonder if it occurred to you that we shall probably starve to-morrow unless Mr. Alton,

who is apparently not to be paid for it, makes what must be a very arduous march to-night?" she said.

"I'm afraid it did not," said Townshead, with a fine unconcern. "I think you understand, my dear, that I leave the commissariat to you, and you have a way of putting things which jars upon one occasionally."

A little trace of colour crept into the girl's cheek, but it faded again as she sat down beside the stove. Still, now and then she pricked her fingers with the needle, which she had not done before, and finally laid down the fabric and laughed softly. "There is," she said, "something distinctly humorous in the whole position."

"You," said her father, "had always a somewhat peculiar sense of humour."

"Well," said his daughter with a slight quiver of her lips, "I feel that I must either cry or laugh to-night. Do you know there is scarcely enough for breakfast in the house, and that I am dreadfully hungry now?"

Townshead glanced at her reproachfully. "Either one or the other would be equally distasteful to me," he said.

The girl sighed, and turned away to thrust a few small billets into the stove. She chose them carefully, for the big box whose ugliness she had hidden by a strip of cheap printed cotton was almost empty. The hired man, seeing no prospect of receiving his wages, had departed after a stormy interview, and shortly after his son followed him. Townshead discovered that sawing wood was especially unsuited to his constitution. Then the girl increased the draught a little and endeavoured to repress a shiver. The house was damp for want of proper packing, and the cold wind that came down from the high peaks moaned about it eerily. It was also very lonely, and the girl, who was young, felt a great longing for human fellowship.

Her father presently took up a book, and there was silence only broken by the rattle of loose shingles overhead and the soft thud against the windows of driving snow, while the girl sat dreaming over her sewing of the brighter days in far-off England which had slipped away from her for ever. Five years was not a very long time, but during it her English friends had forgotten her, and one who had scarcely left her side that memorable night had, though she read of the doings of his regiment now and then, sent her no word or token. A little flush crept into her cheek as, remembering certain words of his, she glanced at her reddened wrists and little toil-hardened hands. She who had been a high-spirited girl with the world at her feet then, was now one of the obscure toilers whose work was never done. Still, because it was only on rare occasions that work left her leisure to think about herself, it had not occurred to her that she had lost but little by the change. The hands that had once been soft and white were now firm and brown, the stillness of the great firs and cedars had given her a calm tranquillity in place of restless haste, and frost and sun the clear, warm-tinted complexion, while a look of strength and patience had replaced the laughter in her hazel eyes.

Suddenly, however, there was a trampling in the snow and a sound of voices, followed after, an interval by a knocking at the door. It swung open, and two whitened objects loaded with bags and packages strode into the room. The blast that came in with them set the lamp flickering, and sent a chill through the girl, but she rose with a smile when rancher Alton stood, a shapeless figure, with the moisture on his bronzed face, beside the stove.

"Take those things through into the kitchen, Charley," he said. "I think we've got them all, Miss Townshead. I hope, sir, you are feeling pretty well."

Townshead made some answer with a slight bend of his head, but Alton appeared a trifle dubious when the girl offered him hospitality.

"I'm afraid the beasts are used up, or I wouldn't think of it," he said.

Nellie Townshead's eyes twinkled as she glanced at him. "Could you not have put it in another way?" she said.

Alton laughed, and brushed his fingers across the top of the stove. "Well, it doesn't sound quite right, but after all the meaning's the great thing," he said. "This place isn't warm enough for you, Miss Nellie."

He turned and walked to the wood-box, and after glancing into it carefully straightened out its covering. Then he strode towards the door, and stopped a moment before he opened it. "Excuse!" he said simply. "No, don't you worry; I know just where the saw and lantern are, and Charley, who comes from the old country, can talk to you for me."

He went out in another moment, but the fact that he was very weary did not escape the attention of the girl, who also noticed the absence of any unnecessary questions or explanations. Alton was, she knew already, one who did things the better because he did them silently. Still, it was Seaforth whom, when nobody observed her, her eyes rested most upon.

It was half an hour before the former returned with a load of scented firewood upon his back, and, saying nothing, filled the box with it, packing each piece where it best fitted deliberately but swiftly; then he passed through the room into an adjoining one, and returned attired picturesquely in Jack Townshead's overalls, which were distinctly too small for him. By this time supper was ready, and Seaforth, also dressed in borrowed garments, seated at the table, but though Miss Townshead had not lost the stamp of refinement she brought with her from England. and her father was dignified and precise, Alton showed no embarrassment. He also listened patiently to Townshead's views on ranching and the mining prospects of that region, though he was already looked up to as a master of the former industry, and contrived

meanwhile that the girl made a good meal instead of attending to him. When it was finished he unfolded a carefully wrapped up packet, and took an envelope out of it, though Miss Townshead noticed that several others he laid down were crumpled and wet.

"Here is a letter for you," he said.

He glanced at the girl questioningly as she took it up, and fingered one of the envelopes upon the table. "Excuse?" he said.

Nellie Townshead smiled and nodded, and then, knowing that the communication handed her was of no importance, watched him covertly as he tore open a long blue envelope. There were documents inside it, and the man's fingers shook a little as he spread out one of them. Then bewildered astonishment crept into his eyes, and was replaced by a flash of something very like anger, after which his face grew suddenly impassive, and he thrust the documents all together into his pocket.

"Get up, Charley, and bring the tray along," he said.

Miss Townshead glanced at him sharply. "What do you wish to do?" she said.

"Wash up," said Alton simply. "I don't know how you fix these things in England, but this is a good Canadian custom. Stir around, Charley."

"But," said the girl, "you don't know where the things are."

"Well," said Alton, smiling, "I figure I can find them."

He laid the cups and dishes on the tray, gave it to Seaforth, and disappeared down a passage carrying the kettle, but not before Miss Townshead had noticed that while his comrade, who had apparently been used to the smoother side of life in England, displayed some awkwardness, everything the big rancher did seemed appropriate, and, because removing plates is not a man's task, she wondered at it. They came back presently, and by

that time the girl, who had opened some of the packages, held a roll of fabric upon her knee.

"If you can find a splash anywhere I'll forfeit a dollar. Charley's good at mopping up," said Alton gravely. "I'm afraid that stuff's a little wet, but it was the Cayuse's fault. He started in kicking and burst the rope, you see."

"It would have been wetter if it had gone into the lake," said Seaforth.

"The lake?" said the girl.

Seaforth nodded. "Yes," he said. "It was on the Tyee trail the pony commenced kicking."

The girl looked up sharply, and there was a subdued brightness in her eyes, for she had more than once shivered when leading her horse along that perilous trail. Alton felt for his comrade's leg under the table and kicked it grievously.

"There wasn't any trouble, and the snow was soft," said he. "You're going to make a dress of that stuff, Miss Nellie?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I could, however, wish the stuff was better."

Alton smiled gravely. "Of course!" he said. "Still, it don't count for much. You would look like a picture in anything."

Nellie Townshead glanced at him sharply, and for a moment there was a faint sparkle in her eyes, for she had a trace of temper.

"Whatever made you say that?" said she.

Alton laughed. "I really don't quite know. I just felt I had to," he said with a naive simplicity. "I wouldn't have done it if I had thought it would vex you."

After this he listened while his comrade talked—and Seaforth on occasion could talk gracefully—until at last he said, "England's not so very big, Miss Nellie. I wonder if you know a place called Carnaby."

"Yes," said the girl. "I once went to see rather a fine old hall there."

“Carnaby Grange?” said Alton quietly.

“Yes,” said the girl with a trace of curiosity. “We spent some little time in the grounds. They lie deep in the woods, and there is a famous rose garden.”

“Yes,” said Alton. “All kinds of roses. And the old place? Tell me about it!”

“Is very picturesque,” said the girl. “It looked quiet and grey, and almost stately under its ivy that autumn day, but I could scarcely describe it you. You have nothing like it in Canada.”

“No,” said Alton gravely. “I have seen nothing like it in Canada. But wasn’t there a lake?”

The girl glanced at him curiously. “There was,” she said. “I remember it lay shining before us between the woods. It was very beautiful, quieter and calmer than our lakes in Canada.”

A slight flush crept through the bronze in Alton’s face, which grew a trifle grim, and a light into his eyes. “There is a lake at Somasco where you can see the white peaks lie shining, and the big Wapiti come down to drink,” he said. “There are cedars and redwoods about it which except for a few in California, haven’t their equal in the world, but there’s nothing about that lake or valley that’s quiet or calm. It’s wild and great and grand. No. They’ve nothing of that kind in the old country. Are not Abana and Pharfar better than all the waters of Israel?”

“Apposite!” said Townshead. “You apparently read the Scriptures?”

“Sometimes,” said Alton simply. “They get hold of me. Those old fellows went right down to the bed rock of human nature back there in Palestine, and it strikes me there’s no great difference in that between now and then.”

“When,” said Townshead smiling, “I was a King in Babylon.”

“No,” said Alton reflectively. “You’re a little late on time. The Christian slave don’t quite fit in.”